

More of the Same or a Different Breed Altogether?

A National Comparison of Role Perceptions and Ethical Stances among Finnish Political Journalists

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Abstract

To date, specialised sub-groups of journalists have received little attention in comparative studies of the professional values of journalists. To shed new light on the situation in Finland, this article explores the role perceptions and ethical stances of an elite group of reporters – political journalists – in comparison with other Finnish journalists. A statistical analysis of two surveys from the Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS) project is undertaken, indicating that political journalists stand out from others by endorsing the role of analytical independent watchdogs and by maintaining more distance to audiences and commercialism. Ethically, they are more cautious than other journalists in using controversial reporting practices. These attributes should stem from the demands of political journalism and the high status of this form of journalism in newsrooms. Political journalists are also more uniform in their values than other sub-groups, but their uniformity is likely to be challenged by current external and internal pressures.

Keywords: Finland, journalists, professional values, statistical analysis, Worlds of Journalism Study

Introduction

Comparative journalism studies have become increasingly popular at a time when the news media is suffering from several intense and interrelated crises in audience, technology, economics and workforce – most acutely in the US, but also elsewhere in the Western world (Barnhurst 2011). One strand of such research has focused on journalistic roles, values, and ethics in different environments during this time of change. A prime example of such comparative work is the Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS) project, whose members have, since its inception in 2007, produced numerous analyses assessing the professional understandings of journalists at both international and national levels (for a list of publications, see WJS 2017a).

In the Nordic countries, such studies have also increased in popularity. For example, national-level studies have been published in Sweden (Asp 2007, 2012), Denmark (Al-

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bæk et al. 2015), and Finland (Pöyhtäri, Väliverronen & Ahva 2014), and a recent comparative article (Ahva et al. 2017) highlighted the many similarities in self-understanding among Nordic news journalists.

To date, however, specialised journalists have received less attention in the scholarly debate. Of particular interest in this article are political journalists, who are traditionally seen as the representatives of the “most ‘sacred part’ of journalism” (Neveu 2002: 23). Their prominent position seems to be reflected in the self-understanding of journalists in the Nordic countries as well, as examples from Denmark (Skovsgaard & van Dalen 2013) and Sweden (Odén 2007) indicate.

Similar comparative work remains to be done in Finland. The practical ethos of political journalists has been the subject of a study by Kantola (2013), but their views have not been compared with other journalists. By investigating the professional role perceptions and ethics of Finnish political journalists *vis-à-vis* other Finnish journalists, this article aims to fill this gap in the literature.

Historical and theoretical background

This study is based on the WJS project, and thus adopts the WJS’s idea of both journalism and the news media as being discursively (re)created social institutions (WJS 2017b). As social institutions, journalism and the news media serve a variety of functions and have crucial social responsibilities (e.g. Kunelius 2000). To serve these diverse functions, journalists rely on various cues, ranging from explicit rules to conventions and practices, upon which they base their actions (Cook 1998). Journalists learn these cues through occupational socialisation during their studies and work, and adopt them in order to follow a “logic of appropriateness” (Cook 1998: 61).

Deuze (2005) argues that, in the Western context, the cues have long been based on ideal professional values that are largely shared among journalists from different countries, such as objectivity, autonomy, public service, timeliness, and ethicality. These values were established mainly in the post-World War II period, when journalism, aided by its relatively secure financial position and monopoly on information dissemination, embraced the ideas of social responsibility and provision of objective information (Waisbord 2013). In this climate, the ideal values offered journalists a viable common goal for developing professionalism (Deuze 2005), although they were never interpreted uniformly. As shown by Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) study of media systems in Western countries, differences in countries’ socio-political and (media)historical backgrounds influence journalists’ practical interpretations. Hallin and Mancini therefore distinguished between countries characterised by liberal, democratic corporatist, and polarised pluralist media systems.

The (media)historical background is important since it shows how the cues form a varied discourse rather than a fixed construct (Carpentier 2005; Hanitzsch 2007). The battle over what is appropriate is waged between different actors – not just journalists, but also journalistic sources, targets, and audiences – who all fight for authority in the field of journalism (cf. Bourdieu 1998). In this field, however, the power to determine the discourse is divided unequally. For instance, among journalists, discourses put forward by practitioners of the so-called “serious news” (Hovden 2016) have dominated the discussion of what constitutes good journalism and good journalistic practice.

However, the ideological and discursive struggle in the field has arguably intensified in the last few decades. Labelled, among other things, as liquid modernity (Bauman 2000), profound societal, cultural, political, and technological transformations have called the functions of journalism in contemporary societies into question (Preston 2009). For instance, the connection between democracy and journalism has been questioned (Zelizer 2013). Moreover, new Internet-based means of undertaking journalism and publishing content (Carlson 2015) have accelerated media competition, and thereby caused financial turmoil in the industry and increased the importance of audience connection. Consequently, the nature of the journalistic profession has become more unstable and unpredictable than before, with journalism facing a growing need to “reinvent professionalism” (Waisbord 2013).

In this state of flux, new visions and interpretations of the constituent parts of journalistic professionalism have emerged (Carpentier 2005; Hanitzsch 2007). The WJS project is based on one such vision, also followed by this article: the idea of journalistic culture. Like other forms of culture, journalistic culture exists at the three levels of ideas, practices, and artefacts. In the project, the focus has been on the first two; that is, journalistic cultures “become discernible in the way journalists think and act; they can be defined as particular sets of ideas and practices by which journalists legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful for themselves and others” (WJS 2017b). The project is, in other words, interested in journalists’ own discursive formations of journalism.

In the WJS, the formation of the discourse of journalism is observed at two levels: intrinsic dimensions (journalistic roles, journalistic ethics and journalistic trust) and extrinsic dimensions (perceived influences and editorial autonomy). These dimensions are then assessed in relation to different contextual forces – individual, organisational, and societal – to explore varieties of journalistic culture in different environments (WJS 2017b). This study concentrates on the intrinsic dimension – that is, on journalists’ self-understanding of their roles and ethics – in one national setting, Finland. It attempts to shed new light on the culture of journalism in Finland through a comparison between an elite group of political journalists (Kantola 2013) and others, in a time when Finnish journalism is undergoing several changes (Pöyhtäri, Väliverronen & Ahva 2016). Before moving on to the analysis, the article presents a brief historical contextualisation of developments in Finnish journalists’ role perceptions and ethics.

The case of Finland

Similar to the other Nordic countries, the self-understanding of journalists in Finland has formed in close connection with the national political system, which has given political journalists a privileged position in Finnish newsrooms (Kantola 2013). In the democratic corporatist tradition (Hallin & Mancini 2004), politicians and journalists shared an understanding of the development of the welfare state (Syvertsen et al. 2014) and political parties had a dominant position in journalism. This influenced journalistic roles: until the 1960s, journalism was seen, initially, as a mouthpiece of the political parties, and then as an arena for parties to communicate their agenda freely (Ørsten et al. 2008). Indeed, journalistic ethics were still in their infancy, with some ethical rules – although of very limited scope – having been published in the late 1920s and late 1950s (Koljonen 2013).

In line with developments in Sweden and Denmark (cf. Jonsson 2002; Thomsen & Søllinge 1991), journalistic professionalisation and differentiation from the political system began in the 1960s. At this time, formal education in journalism expanded; a new self-regulatory mechanism was introduced and newspapers increasingly began to cut their formal ties to political parties (Salminen 1988). However, unlike in Sweden and Denmark (Bondebjerg 1993; Djerf-Pierre & Weibull 2001; Jonsson 2002), increasing professionalisation did not lead to notable changes in journalistic self-understanding in Finland, as the 1970s were marked by party politicisation and the “Finlandisation” debate (Forsberg & Pesu 2016).¹ In this climate, the public service broadcaster YLE became “a prisoner of politics”, and even recruitment was based on the party alignment of journalists well into the 1980s (Salokangas 1996).

The trend of “overpoliticization” (Hemánus 1988: 459) was also visible in the press. Although politically aligned newspapers lost ground more quickly in Finland than in Denmark and Sweden (Nord 2008), 60 to 80 per cent of the news material published in the press in the 1970s came from the political machinery, whether politicians, state administration, or related organisations (Salminen 1988). Under these conditions, journalists adopted the role of deferential reporters who focused on giving citizens information about the elites (Salminen 1988; Väliverronen 2012). From an ethical perspective, such an approach meant a strong focus on the publication of correct facts and/or quotations (Koljonen 2013).

In the 1980s, changes in society began to alter the mood. In politics, President Urho Kekkonen’s resignation in 1981, after 25 years in power, ushered in a more parliamentary mode. A more competitive market economy (Alasuutari 2011), combined with technological developments, led to deregulation in broadcasting. This included, for instance, the introduction of commercial radio stations in 1985. Such changes diversified the media, boosted competition between outlets, and increased journalists’ autonomy from politics (Aula 1991; Salminen 1988).

The formal growth of autonomy continued and between 1970 and 1995, the market share of politically aligned newspapers fell from over 50 per cent to under 15 per cent (Nord 2008). Along with increasing professionalism, this strengthened the idea of journalistic and editorial independence, which had first appeared in a code of ethics for journalists in 1976 (Koljonen 2013). In sum, these changes led to an increasingly diverse and less news-oriented journalistic output, as well as new interpretations of journalistic roles (Hemánus 1988).

Such developments have since gathered pace. Professionalisation was solidified as the number of active journalists in Finland almost doubled from 1983 to 2011 (Hemánus 1988; The Union of Journalists in Finland 2017). Politically aligned newspapers declined to a negligible market position by the turn of the century (Nord 2008), and advancing deregulation in broadcast media since the late 1980s (Koljonen 2013) has contributed to an increasingly commercial orientation in journalism. Lately, technological developments – mainly pertaining to the arrival of online journalism – have increased the competition for audience attention, and generated financial difficulties in journalism. With declining employment figures, the number of salaried members in the Union of Journalists fell by 15 per cent between 2011 and 2015 (The Union of Journalists in Finland 2017).

Amidst all these changes, the journalistic ethos has further diversified. Although traditional reporting-based roles still form the backbone of Finnish journalists’ role

perceptions, roles related to commercialism and serving audiences have gained ground (Pöyhtäri, Väliverronen & Ahva 2014). Journalists' understandings of ethical practices have also become more diverse (Koljonen 2013).

In political journalism, however, the contextual changes have taken more time to appear, compared with other journalistic genres. Despite increasing differentiation from the political system in the 1980s, political journalists still found the Soviet Union a difficult topic following decades of the Kremlin's influence on Finnish politics (Lounasmeri 2013). Thus, the 'opening up' of political journalism had to wait until the 1990s, following the fall of the USSR in 1991 and Finland's EU membership in 1995, when more assertive and diverse political reporting emerged (Isotalus 1998; Kunelius & Väliverronen 2012). With the turn of the twenty-first century, political journalists have further increased the "liberalisation" of journalism (Herkman 2009: 81) by increasing adversarialism and efforts to influence the political agenda (Kantola 2013).

*Three generations of Finnish political journalists:
high moderns, liquefying moderns and liquid moderns*

According to Kantola (2013), the historical development has formed three generations of Finnish political journalists. In her Bauman-inspired terminology, the oldest group – the 'high moderns' (born 1939-1955) – keep close ties with politicians, support objective reporting, and regard the national interest as the most important thing. The second group – the 'liquefying moderns' (born 1956-1969) – focus on issue politics and their own careers by increasing distance to politicians, in a wave of professionalisation. Finally, the 'liquid moderns' (born 1970 onwards) are increasingly individual in both their career choices and ways of working. They are flexible team workers who criticise the consensus politics of the Cold War era, and set the political agenda by favouring ad hoc sources and reporting about the private lives of those in power.

In practice, more traditional interpretations of journalistic roles and ethics still enjoy widespread support. Despite journalists' increasing presence as authorial voices in stories, neutral and detached reporting about political elites was still the primary tone of political journalism in the early twenty-first century (Kunelius & Väliverronen 2012). Moreover, many (older) political journalists viewed the emerging adversarial forms of reporting with suspicion (Kantola 2013).

However, the detached, neutral way of reporting is by no means secure. With the advancing professionalisation of political communication (Herkman 2009), the increasing importance of the EU, and the rise of populism, seen in the success of the Finns Party, politics has changed. In journalism, increasing redundancies and the merging of news desks have also affected political journalism in recent years, with the growth of online political journalism adding to stress among practitioners. Against the background of these changes, the status of political journalists as the "crown jewels" of journalism is under increasing pressure (Väliverronen 2017). Even the connection between journalism and democracy – itself crucial for political journalism as we know it – has been questioned by media executives (Grönvall 2015).

Methods, research questions, samples and hypotheses

The self-understanding of other Finnish journalists is undergoing change in these uncertain times. However, how can we understand the self-perception of political journalists? This issue has so far received scant scholarly attention. Kantola's (2013) study is the only one available and, for that work, data were collected in 2010-2011. Since then, several changes have occurred which make the undertaking of a new study necessary. Moreover, in her study, Kantola looks at the practical ethos of political journalists, based on 25 interviews. This study examines the issue from a different angle, using a quantitative survey methodology to statistically explore Finnish political journalists' role perceptions and ethical values, while adding a comparative element, regarding other Finnish journalists, into the investigation. The study has two targeted research questions:

RQ1. What are Finnish political journalists' role perceptions and ethical values?

RQ2. How do their perceptions differ from other Finnish journalists, and why?

These questions are investigated using data from the WJS project. In the case of role perceptions, respondents were presented with 21 different functions for journalism and asked to evaluate their importance on a five-step Likert scale (for the list, see C12 in WJS 2017c). Ethical observations were divided into two parts. In the first part, journalists' general ethical considerations were gauged with four different statements, based on Forsyth's (1980) distinction between absolutists, relativists, situationists, and exceptionists. Responses were also given on a five-step Likert scale (see C13 in WJS 2017c). In the second part, journalists' practical ethical stances, in the case of an important story, were measured on a three-step Likert scale (C14 in WJS 2017c), using their evaluations of 12 controversial ethical practices.

The analysis is based on two samples: a nationally representative survey of all journalists in Finland, and a representative survey conducted among the members of the Association of Political Journalists in Finland (APJF). The APJF is the only national organisation for journalists who specialise in politics. It does not represent the whole spectrum of political journalism in Finland, but it was deemed suitable for comparative purposes because its membership data are up-to-date, while membership criteria are directly comparable with the WJS survey requirements. Table 1 describes the samples in a more detailed fashion; for more information on the national sample, see Pöyhtäri, Väliverronen & Ahva (2014).

Table 1. *Sampling information*

	Political journalists	Other journalists
Number of respondents	80	345
Data collection period	Dec. 2013 – Oct. 2014	Mar. 2013 – Aug. 2013
Data collection method	Online	Phone/email
Response rate (%)	61	50–55*
Average age of respondents (years)	51	43
Gender distribution in sample (W/M; %)	36/64	55/45

Comments: * Due to the data collection method, the exact response rate could not be determined.

There are some limitations to the data, regarding different collection times and methods, as well as an over-representation of mid- and upper-level management in the Finnish national sample (cf. Pöyhtäri, Väliverronen & Ahva 2014). However, as employment position generally has a negligible effect on Finnish journalists' values (Lauk, Harro-Loit & Väliverronen 2014), and the problems with online surveys concern mainly large-scale national samples (Chang & Krosnick 2009), comparisons were considered meaningful for this study.

The surveys were analysed using the software package SPSS. In the following, the findings are presented in two parts. The first part focuses on journalists' role perceptions (RQ1), and the second one looks at their ethical considerations (RQ2). Based on previous studies, the following hypotheses were made for the analysis:

H1a. In Finnish political journalists' role perceptions, the focus is on reporting, analysing, and monitoring political elites from a neutral and detached perspective. Other roles receive less support. Ethically, their stances are strongly guided by the professional code of ethics.

H1b. Following Kantola's (2013) study there should be generational differences: deviance from the values in H1a should increase in younger journalists, who favour a more opinionated and commercial approach to politics.

H2. Overall, political journalists' role perceptions and ethical stances are more traditional and uniform than those of other journalists. This is due to the higher average age of political journalists, the prestige of politics in journalism, and the specialised nature and demands of political journalism (e.g. parliamentary reporting).

Results

Role perceptions

The answers paint a picture of political journalists as independent, detached, and neutral professionals (Table 2). They regard the main functions of journalism as analysing current events, watchdog journalism, and factually correct and objective reporting. Supporting government policy, conveying a positive image of the political leadership, and being an adversary of the government enjoy the least support. Such views are central to the role of a detached watchdog (Hanitzsch 2011), an ideal that is widely shared by Finnish journalists (Pöyhtäri, Väliverronen & Ahva 2014), mainly for historical reasons. The detached watchdog role combines the long-appreciated tenets of objective reporting and dissemination of correct information, with the later quest for independence from the party-political system.

Initially, the findings appear to echo an earlier view of the shared identity of Finnish journalists, defined as a commitment to politics as a rational undertaking, to taking a non-partisan stand on issues, and active and conscious detachment from political parties and groups (Reunanen 2014).

However, a principal component analysis (not shown here) indicates only some support for the thesis. Detachment and objective reporting form a less influential component, and the analytical approach is combined with elements from the critical change agent role (Hanitzsch 2011). However, this notion should be treated with caution since there is some cross-loading, with the three main components only accounting for 42 per cent of the variance in the sample. Furthermore, Cronbach's alpha is slightly below that which is considered acceptable ($\alpha = .76$).

Table 2. *Role perceptions of journalists*

Role	Political journalists (N_{min}=73)	All other journalists (N_{min}=326)	General reporters (N_{min}=183)	News specialists (N_{min}=37)
Provide analysis of current affairs	4.64 (.56)	4.28 (.80)	4.26 (.80)	4.39 (.74)
Monitor and scrutinise political leaders	4.61 (.61)	3.69 (1.31)	3.88 (1.16)	4.39 (.80)
Provide information people need to make political decisions	4.51 (.78)	3.57 (1.26)	3.80 (1.09)	4.17 (.74)
Report things as they are	4.41 (.71)	4.56 (.73)	4.57 (.74)	4.68 (.52)
Be a detached observer	4.23 (.77)	4.51 (.74)	4.54 (.76)	4.56 (.63)
Monitor and scrutinise business	3.79 (1.12)	3.53 (1.25)	3.65 (1.15)	3.98 (.99)
Promote tolerance and cultural diversity	3.64 (.99)	3.92 (1.02)	4.06 (.95)	3.98 (.85)
Let people express their views	3.55 (1.03)	3.84 (1.02)	3.99 (.94)	4.12 (.75)
Educate the audience	3.48 (.95)	3.45 (.99)	3.36 (.98)	3.43 (.98)
Tell stories about the world	3.45 (.99)	4.13 (.85)	4.10 (.83)	4.07 (.66)
Motivate people to participate in political activity	3.33 (1.08)	2.53 (1.13)	2.66 (1.12)	3.00 (.98)
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	2.96 (1.05)	3.34 (1.01)	3.39 (.95)	3.56 (1.00)
Set the political agenda	2.69 (1.09)	2.34 (1.04)	2.44 (1.03)	2.45 (.93)
Influence public opinion	2.59 (.96)	3.09 (.98)	3.05 (1.00)	3.03 (.96)
Support national development	2.56 (1.07)	2.93 (1.02)	2.95 (.98)	3.05 (1.19)
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	2.46 (.93)	3.26 (1.01)	3.28 (.87)	3.32 (.99)
Advocate for social change	2.37 (1.01)	2.95 (1.03)	2.97 (1.09)	3.00 (.93)
Provide entertainment and relaxation	2.27 (.96)	3.02 (1.08)	3.00 (1.01)	2.98 (.97)
Be an adversary of the government	2.25 (1.10)	2.05 (1.06)	2.11 (1.08)	2.27 (.99)
Convey a positive image of political leadership	1.35 (.64)	1.23 (.53)	1.26 (.57)	1.22 (.42)
Support government policy	1.13 (.41)	1.20 (.45)	1.22 (.47)	1.23 (.53)
Mean of all answers	3.17	3.22	3.27	3.38

Comments: The question was posed: “Please tell me how important each of these things is in your work. 5 means you find them extremely important, 4 means very important, 3 means somewhat important, 2 means little importance and 1 means unimportant.”

The result indicates variation between different groups, with political journalists standing out in a cross-group comparison (Table 3). For them, the detached watchdog role has a strong analytical focus. This appears to combine neatly with Reunanen’s (2014) description of the rational approach to politics, with the need to remain non-partisan and detached from political groups. Support for this role was confirmed by the apparent deviations from it. In their role perception, political journalists are more likely than others to set the political agenda and to motivate people to participate in political activity. However, they added in their open-ended commentaries that such behaviour must remain non-partisan. By this logic, setting the political agenda is interpreted as taking a critical and analytical stance on all political actors, and motivating people is regarded as a general encouragement to vote and to uphold the political system.

Thus, political journalists clearly position themselves as independent analysts. From this orientation it follows that, in comparison to others, they maintain more distance to citizens and commercial interests. For other journalists, role perceptions are more diverse. Although the objective and analytical functions are most strongly supported, working as a critical change agent (Hanitzsch 2011) or an engaging storyteller are also possible options. In this vein, other journalists have a closer relationship to audiences

Table 3. *Comparisons of political journalists' role perceptions against other groups, statistically significant differences*

Role	All other journalists	General reporters	News specialists
Provide analysis of current affairs	POLJOUR ***	POLJOUR ***	
Monitor and scrutinise political leaders	POLJOUR ***	POLJOUR ***	
Provide information people need to make political decisions	POLJOUR ***	POLJOUR ***	POLJOUR **
Report things as they are	OTHERS *	GENREP *	NEWSSPEC *
Be a detached observer	OTHERS ***	GENREP ***	NEWSSPEC *
Monitor and scrutinise business			
Promote tolerance and cultural diversity	OTHERS *	GENREP **	
Let people express their views	OTHERS *	GENREP **	NEWSSPEC **
Educate the audience			
Tell stories about the world	OTHERS ***	GENREP ***	NEWSSPEC **
Motivate people to participate in political activity	POLJOUR ***	POLJOUR ***	
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	OTHERS **	GENREP **	NEWSSPEC **
Set the political agenda	POLJOUR **		
Influence public opinion	OTHERS ***	GENREP **	NEWSSPEC *
Support national development	OTHERS **	GENREP **	NEWSSPEC *
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	OTHERS ***	GENREP ***	NEWSSPEC ***
Advocate for social change	OTHERS ***	GENREP ***	NEWSSPEC **
Provide entertainment and relaxation	OTHERS ***	GENREP ***	NEWSSPEC ***
Be an adversary of the government			
Convey a positive image of political leadership			
Support government policy			

Comments: Method: Mann-Whitney (all other journalists) and Kruskal-Wallis & Dunn-Bonferroni (other groups) comparisons. ***: $p < 0.001$, **: $p < 0.01$, *: $p < 0.05$.

and commercialism than political journalists, which is further reflected in the greater influence they draw from market considerations than political journalists.

Internally, political journalists' opinions largely echo the values of the high moderns in Kantola's (2013) division. One explanation for this is the high average age of the respondents. However, younger political journalists' role perceptions are very similar, which indicates a 'pack mentality' often found in journalists covering the same beat (van Dalen, de Vreese & Albæk 2012). Between the age groups mentioned in Kantola's study, only one statistically significant difference was found: the liquefying moderns are more eager to influence public opinion than the liquid moderns. Comparisons based on gender, level of education, employment in public service or commercial media, and journalists' position in the newsroom yielded few significant differences. Moreover, the differences observed did not form clear patterns.

Another reason for such a uniform role perception can be found in the high status of politics in newsrooms. In political journalism, the general discussion about increasing multi-skilling and job rotation (cf. Nikunen 2014) is yet to materialise. Two-thirds of political journalists said they were senior reporters or in a leading position in their newsrooms², and nearly 95 per cent said they did stories about politics only. Moreover,

although financial austerity measures have affected political journalism – with 62 per cent of respondents in an internal APJF survey saying that their desk’s resources had diminished in previous years (Vahti 2014) – political journalists experience less pressure from the market than their colleagues.

Ethical considerations

With regard to general ethical stances, Finnish political journalists’ opinions underline their professionalism. They indicate strong support for code adherence – the WJS equivalent to Forsyth’s (1980) absolutism – by stating almost unanimously that the professional code of ethics must be respected in any situation and context (Table 4). The other ethical stances in Forsyth’s model – situationism, subjectivism, and exceptionism – receive little support in comparison. Notably, there are no statistically significant differences between political journalists, or between them and other journalists, which confirms a uniform ethical basis in Finnish journalism (cf. Pöyhtäri, Väliverronen & Ahva 2016).

Table 4. *Journalists’ general ethical stances*

Statement	Political journalists (N _{min} =80)	All other journalists (N _{min} =344)	General reporters (N _{min} =190)	News specialists (N _{min} =40)
Journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context	4.65 (.58)	4.65 (.60)	4.65 (.62)	4.78 (.57)
What is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation	2.52 (1.45)	2.62 (1.37)	2.66 (1.35)	2.30 (1.36)
What is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgment	2.30 (1.39)	2.39 (1.23)	2.32 (1.19)	2.15 (1.19)
It is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it	2.04 (1.24)	1.99 (1.15)	2.01 (1.12)	1.88 (1.17)
Mean of all answers	2.88	2.91	2.91	2.78

Comments: The question was posed: “The following statements describe different approaches to journalism. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree. 5 means you strongly agree, 4 means somewhat agree, 3 means undecided, 2 means somewhat disagree, and 1 means strongly disagree.”

The findings can be explained by way of the democratic corporatist tradition of a strong self-regulatory system (Hallin & Mancini 2004). This has had an important impact on the professional profile of journalists since the first industry-led code of ethics was introduced in 1968. Currently, the overwhelming majority of media outlets in the country subscribe to the ethical code set by the Council of Mass Media, the body overseeing good journalistic practice in Finland. Moreover, higher education institutes offering degree courses in journalism also have a long tradition of teaching journalistic ethics in their curricula (Koljonen 2013).

In the case of controversial practices, Finnish journalists have a negative stance regarding most practices presented (Table 5). This follows logically from their strong trust in the ethical code: many of the practices described in the list are in direct violation of the ethical code (GfJ 2014: Sections 4, 8, 10-11), while some others are only considered acceptable when “matters that are in the public interest cannot be otherwise investigated” (GfJ 2014: Section 9).

Table 5. *Journalists' opinions on controversial ethical practices*

Practice	Political journalists (N _{min} =63)	All other journalists (N _{min} =313)	General reporters (N _{min} =177)	News specialists (N _{min} =38)
Using confidential business or government documents without authorisation	1.90 (.47)	2.06 (.52)	2.08 (.51)	1.98 (.52)
Getting employed in a firm or organisation to gain inside information	2.30 (.49)	2.13 (.55)	2.10 (.54)	2.15 (.53)
Using hidden microphones or cameras	2.32 (.47)	2.27 (.52)	2.25 (.52)	2.22 (.48)
Using re-creations or dramatisations of news by actors	2.32 (.59)	2.04 (.62)	1.99 (.58)	2.08 (.63)
Claiming to be somebody else	2.49 (.50)	2.32 (.52)	2.29 (.50)	2.40 (.50)
Exerting pressure on unwilling informants to get a story	2.53 (.50)	2.25 (.63)	2.20 (.65)	2.20 (.60)
Making use of personal documents such as letters and pictures without permission	2.59 (.50)	2.69 (.48)	2.65 (.51)	2.79 (.41)
Publishing stories with unverified content	2.64 (.48)	2.53 (.55)	2.54 (.54)	2.60 (.50)
Paying people for confidential information	2.73 (.45)	2.56 (.52)	2.57 (.53)	2.58 (.55)
Altering photographs	2.82 (.39)	2.73 (.47)	2.68 (.50)	2.80 (.41)
Altering or fabricating quotes from sources	2.97 (.16)	2.97 (.22)	2.97 (.23)	3.00 (.00)
Accepting money from sources	3.00 (.00)	2.99 (.15)	2.98 (.21)	3.00 (.00)
Mean of all answers	2.55	2.47	2.48	2.48

Comments: The question was posed: “Given an important story, which of the following, if any, do you think may be justified on occasion and which would you not approve of under any circumstances? 1 means it is always justified, 2 means it is justified on occasion, and 3 means you would not approve under any circumstances.”

Political journalists are more cautious than others, although differences between them and the rest – particularly specialised news journalists – are smaller than was the case in role perceptions (Table 6). The significant differences are mainly connected to relations with sources. Political journalists are less willing to exert pressure on informants than others, and more likely to refrain from using exceptional methods when gathering information. This can be explained by their fixed group of elite informants, which is small in the case of political journalists (Kunelius & Väliverronen 2012), and particularly small in the case of parliamentary reporters (Kantola 2013). In a small group in which actors know each other, exceptional methods become rare, or even impossible, to use.

Such stances further highlight the professionalism and detachment of political journalists. Detachment is only broken when using business or government documents without permission, which political journalists accept more readily than others. Firstly, this practice can be understood in terms of political journalists' high support for the watchdog role, as well as the growing adversarialism in Finnish political journalism (Kantola 2013). Secondly, there are professional and commercial incentives related to leaks, which are the fuel of sought-after and sellable political scoops.

As in the case of role perceptions, differences among political journalists were small. Only one discernible pattern was observed: Kantola's liquid modern political journalists were slightly more willing than their older colleagues to use controversial practices. This was in line with earlier observations about Finnish journalists in general (Pöyhtäri, Väliverronen & Ahva 2016), and offered some support for Kantola's (2013) notion regarding the liquid moderns' greater willingness to increase distance to their sources. However, these differences are not enough to warrant discussion of a generational shift.

Table 6. *Comparisons of political journalists' stances on ethical practices against other groups, statistically significant differences*

Practice	All other journalists	General reporters	News specialists
Using confidential business or government documents without authorisation	POLJOUR *	POLJOUR **	
Getting employed in a firm or organisation to gain inside information	OTHERS *	GENREP **	
Using hidden microphones or cameras			
Using re-creations or dramatisations of news by actors	OTHERS **	GENREP ***	
Claiming to be somebody else	OTHERS *	GENREP **	
Exerting pressure on unwilling informants to get a story	OTHERS **	GENREP ***	NEWSSPEC **
Making use of personal documents such as letters and pictures without permission			NEWSSPEC *
Publishing stories with unverified content			
Paying people for confidential information	OTHERS *	GENREP *	
Altering photographs			
Altering or fabricating quotes from sources			
Accepting money from sources			

Comments: Method: Mann-Whitney (all other journalists) and Kruskal-Wallis & Dunn-Bonferroni (other groups) comparisons. ***: $p < 0.001$, **: $p < 0.01$, *: $p < 0.05$.

Discussion and conclusions

Finnish political journalists' opinions largely follow initial expectations. As posited in H1a, they show strong support for their role as detached analytical watchdogs. Ethically, they base their decisions on the industry code of conduct, which further highlights their independence. These values have widespread support among other Finnish journalists too, which confirms the importance of the national background in terms of journalists' value formation (cf. Hallin & Mancini 2004; Reich & Hanitzsch 2013). In line with H2, however, such interpretations are more pronounced among political journalists than others. Apart from the requirements of political journalism, there are two classes of reasons for this: Firstly, the privileged position of political journalists in Finland leads to relatively low external pressure on their values. Secondly, internally, the small number of political journalists is likely to be conducive to a 'guild effect', causing uniformity in the views of individuals (cf. Lauk, Harro-Loit & Väliverronen 2014).

However, this study lends little support to Kantola's (2013) observation of three generations of political journalists (H1b). Although this finding is interesting, the possible biases of the different methods must be taken into account. Kantola used qualitative interviews in her work, the results of which she labelled as providing an analytical distinction, rather than a representative study. In surveys, journalists tend to show desirability bias (for a brief discussion, see van Dalen, de Vreese & Albæk 2012), which may be accentuated here by the aforementioned guild effect. The different approaches taken may also cause a discrepancy. This study has its starting point in abstract values and predetermined journalistic roles, whereas Kantola (2013) uses the perspective of individual practices and their open-ended descriptions. Because journalists may support the same abstract ideal values in a survey,

but describe their practical enactments very differently in interviews, findings should be interpreted with caution.

This is not to negate the findings of either study, however. Rather, it shows that further research is needed to obtain a better picture of political journalists' attitudes. More comparative studies are required, and methodological triangulation might help to fill the gaps and establish a firmer connection between journalists' perceptions and actual practices (cf. Nikunen 2014; van Dalen, de Vreese & Albæk 2012).

Overall, the findings indicate that political journalists' interpretations of their role are based on a rather narrow, and even elitist, understanding of politics. The question for the future is: how long will such an attitude be possible at a time when pressures against it are increasing from multiple sides? Firstly, desk mergers have affected all the main political news desks in Finland, in some way, in the last five years, and political journalists have already expressed concern about their own distinctive position amidst the change (Välvirronen 2017). Secondly, pressures to re-evaluate journalistic roles and ethics are not diminished by current trends in networked societies, which put forward inclusivity, transparency, activation, and a conversational style as crucial for journalism in ensuring the functioning of a healthy democracy (e.g. Min 2015), as well as its own financial future.

Although research has suggested that journalists are capable of consolidating around their key values in times of uncertainty (Wiik 2009), a reformulation of professional role perceptions and ethics seems likely among Finnish political journalists. Indeed, some hints towards potential changes are already visible in journalistic content. In the last ten years, for example, Finnish political journalism has increased its differentiation from the political system by means of stylistic changes that are taking different outlets into slightly different directions (Välvirronen forthcoming). Seeing a similar diversification in the interpretations of journalistic roles and ethics among practitioners would not be a surprise.

Notes

1. Forsberg and Pesu (2016: 474) refer to Finlandisation as "a foreign policy strategy where a smaller state adapts its policy to the interests of a bigger neighbouring country, typically a Great Power". In the case of Finland, the reference was made in relation to the Soviet Union.
2. In the national sample, the equivalent proportion was 27 per cent.

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